CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method of operating an electronic coupon distribution system comprising the steps of:

collecting user information from a user of a client system indicative of one or more demographic characteristics of the user
5 without obtaining information sufficient to specifically identify the user;

associating a user ID with the user information at a main server system;

selecting coupons according to the user ID to thereby
10 identify coupons appropriate for the user based on the user's demographic characteristics; and,

transmitting the selected coupons from the main server system to the client system.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein said collecting step comprises the substep of:

obtaining from the remote user demographic characteristics including at least one of a postal zip code associated with the
5 user and a state in which the user resides.

3. The method of claim 1 further including the step of: associating the user ID with the remote client system.

4. The method of claim 3 further including the step of:

generating a printed version of one of the transmitted coupons at the remote client system that includes the user ID.

5.   The method of claim 3 further including the step of: transmitting a request from the client system to the server system to perform said selecting step wherein the request includes the user ID.

6.   The method of claim 5 wherein said request transmitting step includes the substep of:
automatically including the user ID in the request without any intervention by the remote user of the client system.

7.   The method of claim 5 wherein said request transmitting step occurs automatically without any intervention by the remote user.

8.   The method of claim 7 wherein said request transmitting step occurs at predetermined intervals.

9.   The method of claim 3 wherein the remote client system operates in accordance with an operating system characterized by a graphical user interface (GUI), said method further including the steps of:
displaying an icon visible to the user in a first display state; and,
displaying the icon in a second display state different from the first display state when new coupon are available for the user.

10.   The method of claim 9 wherein the second display state is a flashing display state.

11. The method of claim 3 wherein said transmitting step includes the substeps of:

encrypting coupon data corresponding to the selected coupons at the server system in accordance with a server system encryption

5 strategy; and,

sending the server-encrypted coupon data to the client system.

12. The method of claim 11 further including the step of:

receiving the server-encrypted coupon data at the client system;

encrypting the server-encrypted coupon data in accordance

5 with a client system encryption strategy to thereby generate doubly-encrypted coupon data; and,

storing the doubly-encrypted coupon data on the client system.

13. The method of claim 12 further including the steps of:

decrypting the doubly-encrypted coupon data at the client system; and,

generating a printed version of one of the selected coupons

5 at the remote client system.

14. The method of claim 3 further comprising the steps of:

transmitting advertising data to the client system; and,

displaying at least a portion of the transmitted advertising data on a display portion of the remote client system.

15. The method of claim 14 wherein the advertising data comprises a plurality of advertising impressions, and, wherein said displaying step comprises the substep of:

selecting one of the plurality of advertising impressions as

5 a function of a selected subcategory of coupons available on the remote client system.

16.   The method of claim 3 further comprising the steps of:

detecting events occurring at the remote client system;

storing the detected events in a user history file; and,

transmitting the user history file to the server system.

17.   The method of claim 16 wherein said detecting step includes the substeps of:

determining when one of the plurality of advertising impressions has been displayed on a display portion of the remote

5   client system; and,

determining a sponsor identification of the advertising impression.

18.   The method of claim 16 wherein the storing step comprises the substep of:

encrypting the detected events to thereby generate encrypted user event information; and,

5   writing the encrypted user event information to the client system.

19.   A coupon distribution system, comprising:

means for collecting user information from a user of a remote client system indicative of one or more demographic characteristics of the user without obtaining information sufficient to

5   specifically identify the user;

means for associating a user ID with the user information at a main server system;

means for selecting coupons according to the user ID to thereby identify coupons appropriate for the user based on the

10   user's demographic characteristics; and,

means for transmitting the selected coupons from the server system to the client system.

20. The system of claim 19 wherein said collecting means includes means for obtaining from the remote user demographic characteristics including at least one of a postal zip code associated with the user and a state in which the user resides.

21. The system of claim 20 further including means for associating the user ID with the remote client system.

22. A method of secure electronic coupon distribution comprising the steps of:

collecting user information from a user of a client system;

associating a user ID with the user information;

selecting coupons according to the user ID;

encrypting coupon data corresponding to the selected coupons; and,

transmitting the encrypted coupon data from the main server system to the client system.

23. The method of claim 22 further including the step of: decrypting the encrypted coupon data to recover the selected coupons.

24. A method of secure electronic coupon distribution comprising the steps of:

associating a Uniform Resource Locator (URL) including a promotional code with a coupon;

displaying the coupon to a user;

disabling access to the URL by the user; and,

invoking the URL with a browser to thereby enable the user to redeem the coupon.

25. The method of claim 24 wherein said invoking step includes the substep of selecting the coupon by one of clicking on the displayed coupon and clicking on an object different than the coupon displayed to the user.